

# BRICS AS A TRANSREGIONAL ADVOCACY COALITION<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

After almost ten years since the first summit of the BRICS, still there is no consensual definition about the kind of institution that this group represents. Born as an acronym, in an analysis produced by an international financial group, versing about emergent economies and their roles in the future<sup>4</sup>, the BRICS earned a political role since diplomatic meetings of these countries started to happen, evolving into a structure, still in force, of annual summits.

Initially, the approach between the BRICS countries was guaranteed by the mutual goal of changing the rules of the Bretton Woods institutions - particularly of the IMF and the World Bank -, in the context of relative weakening of the US and the EU world power, as a result of the 2008 financial

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<sup>4</sup> The term BRICS was designed by Jim O'Neill in reports to Goldman Sachs in 2001 and 2003, identifying countries with the greatest potential for growth and hence preferential destination for the investments of the bank's customers. According to O'Neill, these countries, particularly China, would outpace developed countries in their relative share of the world economy. However, this article will not analyze the BRICS from the standpoint of private financial market players, but from its political perspective, emphasizing the diplomatic concertation among its five countries.

crisis. Later on, the summit's role changed into a broader activity, establishing multilateral agreements dealing with themes of economic and social development, such as renewable energies, water resources, science and technology. Finally, the New Development Bank and the Contingent Reserve Agreement were created, building new mechanisms to finance investments in infrastructure and to support its members countries in case of a balance of payments crises.

In this article, we aim to: (i) review the concepts adopted in the literature to explain the role of the BRICS in international relations and (ii) present a new BRICS conceptualization proposal, considering the grouping of a transregional advocacy coalition. From the first to the last Summit Conference, the BRICS claimed for a multilateral world order, requesting the inclusion of emerging countries in the main institutions of the Western order. Over time, the action of the BRICS was deepened, becoming an extensive agenda of cooperation, but maintaining its initial claims.

In the following section, the article is organized as follows: in the first section, we will discuss the behavior of the BRICS countries in the international scenario and in their intra-group relations. We will then review the BRICS literature in order to take stock of the interpretations of the nature and behavior of the group. In the third section, we will present our proposal to interpret the BRICS as an advocacy coalition, based on the empirical contributions presented in the first section. Final considerations and a reflection about the insertion of the BRICS in the global order conclude the article.

## The BRICS trajectory: from institutional construction to current challenges

The BRICS is a fragile institutionalized minilateral arrangement, involving Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. This institution<sup>5</sup> is characterized by the organization of annual summit meetings as well as intermediary meetings that allow the definition of joint positions on the global political agenda, as well as the definition of cooperation agreements in other areas of public policies, which assume a horizontal format typical of South-South relations.

The recent diplomatic approximation between BRICS countries has two dimensions: in Asia, the approximation between Russia, China and In-

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<sup>5</sup> We follow Simmons and Martin (2002) in their definition of an international institution as "sets of rules whose purpose is to govern international behavior." Institutions can be formal or informal (Simmons & Martin, 2002, p.194).

dia goes back to ministerial-level meetings held in 2001 to discuss security issues such as terrorism, trafficking and migration. Since then, there have been intermittent meetings on the margins of the UN General Assembly and formal meetings. In 2006, Brazil joined the group, responding to a Russian invitation (Stuenkel, 2015). On the southern front, Brazil, India and South Africa have been on a successful approximation since the turn of the century, when the three countries have established common positions in the World Trade Organization, in defense of the patent infringement of medicines for AIDS treatment<sup>6</sup>. In addition, Brazil and India led the G20, a coalition of developing countries that aimed at countering developed countries - in particular the United States and the European Union - in negotiations under the WTO Doha Round. Finally, in 2003, the three countries established the IBSA Forum, which sought to promote concerted and trilateral cooperation on a variety of foreign policy issues.

The BRIC was established as an immediate consequence of the Russian invitation for Brazil to integrate the conversations between the “RIC”. At the first informal meeting of the group, in 2006, international security issues were left to the background<sup>7</sup>, prioritizing the identification of common issues of discontent about the international financial architecture (Stuenkel, 2015). From then on, the BRIC would jointly seek to broaden the G8 and reform the decision-making mechanisms in the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which were benefiting developed countries disproportionately<sup>8</sup>.

It should be noted that the BRIC countries were not trying to democratize the decision-making processes of global financial architecture, but were just seeking to maximize the importance of their own economies for the management of global affairs<sup>9</sup>, proposing a more plural structure. According

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6 Drug patents are regulated by the TRIPS Agreement, which is signed within the WTO. Brazil, India and South Africa claimed that AIDS medicines should be guided by a non-market logic, associated with public health and human rights advocacy, which justified the need to break these patents.

7 Though they have never been abandoned.

8 The vote of IMF and World Bank member countries is weighted by reference to their share of the global economy, leading developed countries to have a natural concentration of power in the decision-making process. This asymmetry, however, has become even more apparent with the growth of developing economies in recent years, relatively faster than in developed countries, which has not been reflected in a new allocation of countries' shares in the decision-making process of these international financial institutions. The reform of the IMF's decision-making process, which was called for by the IMF, was completed in 2010.

9 A possible demand for the democratization of deliberative and decision-making processes in the institutions responsible for global governance would imply the participation of all sovereign states, which was not part of the BRICS' claims.

to the diplomatic discourse, this new structure would increase the participation of developing countries in the main decision-making bodies of global governance<sup>10</sup>. In this sense, the BRIC countries would place themselves as representatives of developing countries in the deliberative and decision-making bodies regarding the regulation of international financial and monetary relations (Stuenkel, 2015).

In the context of the 2008 international financial crisis, Brazil, Russia, India, China and other developing countries - including South Africa, the future BRICS member - were invited to the G20<sup>11</sup> meeting, on November 15 of the same year, in a measure that tried to establish the first actions to contain the global effects of the crisis. The G20, although it had existed since 1999, gained greater relevance after the 2008 crisis, when developed countries agreed that G8 meetings<sup>12</sup> were insufficient to address international economic problems, recognizing the importance of developing countries in international economic relations. In other words, responses to the crisis could only be effective if they had the participation of developing countries in the deliberative process (Flemes, 2010). The idea that developed countries might require the management of global financial relations, imposing their rules, was put away.

In 2009, the first BRIC summit took place in Yekaterinburg, Russia. At this summit, centrality was given to issues related to the reform of the international financial architecture. In their joint statement, the BRIC called for increased representativeness and transparency of decision-making processes in international financial institutions (IFIs), as well as stability, predictability and diversification of the international monetary system (Damico, 2015). They also emphasized the need to continue the Heiligendamm Process, which aimed to institutionalize relations between the G8 and the countries that made up the so-called Outreach 5 - South Africa, Brazil, China, India and Mexico. Notwithstanding the prominence given to international finance and global governance, the BRIC also sought to affirm common positions related to issues of developing countries, such as food security, energy security, cli-

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<sup>10</sup> It is, according to Rosenau (2000), a governance without government, that is, of the "agreement on the existence of functions that must be performed to render viable any human system, even if this system has not produced organizations and institutions explicitly to exercise them (Rosenau, 2000, p.14).

<sup>11</sup> The G20 is composed of the European Union and 19 countries: South Africa Germany, Saudi Arabia, Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, South Korea, France, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Mexico, United Kingdom, United States, Russia and Turkey.

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that Russia was part of the G8.

mate change and development assistance<sup>13</sup>.

The second BRIC summit took place in Brasilia in 2010. Financial issues kept their centrality, and the countries strengthened their joint position in defense of the IFIs reform. The reform of the United Nations Security Council<sup>14</sup> was also proposed. South-South cooperation began to take shape, with meetings at the bureaucratic level - between finance ministers and central bank presidents, agriculture ministers, representatives of the national development banks and the public security area - and at the level of civil society - business forum, think tanks seminar and cooperative forum (Damico, 2015). From then on, a type of cooperation organized in three ways, as defined by the BRICS itself: (1) the diplomatic level; (2) the level of relationship between government agencies and public enterprises; (3) the level of civil society relationship<sup>15</sup>.

In 2011, the third summit was held in Sanya, China, when South Africa's entry into the BRICS was formalized. The entry of the second largest African economy - after Nigeria - into the BRICS caused strangeness among political and economic analysts: compared to the other BRICS countries, South Africa has modest territory, population and GDP. In addition, it was a country with no relevant impact or major political aspiration at the global level. From the diplomatic point of view, however, the country's accession to the BRICS represented the diversification of its representation among developing countries, representing a key country in the context of African political relations (Stuenkel, 2015). It is also important that South Africa already had established relevant diplomatic relations with Brazil and India, which certainly were a facilitator for the African country's entry into the group. At the Sanya summit, in addition, new themes were included in intra-BRICS cooperation, such as culture, education, sports and the green economy (Damico, 2015). Meetings were also organized between businessmen, representatives of the financial and university sectors, as well as a meeting between trade ministers who were absent from the previous meeting<sup>16</sup>. Regarding the establishment of common positions in the different international regimes<sup>17</sup>, the BRICS sought to estab-

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13 Information available at: <<http://www.brics2018.org.za/en/previous-summits>>. Accessed on 12 May 2018.

14 Ibidem.

15 See: <<http://www.brics2018.org.za/en/what-brics>>. Accessed on 12 May 2018.

16 <<http://www.brics2018.org.za/en/previous-summits>>. Accessed on 12 May 2018.

17 According to Krasner (1983), international regimes are "sets of principles, norms and implicit or explicit rules and decision-making procedures in a particular area of international relations around which the expectations of the actors converge. Principles are beliefs in facts, causes, and moral issues. Standards are defined standards of behavior in terms of rights and

lish a convergent position on the issue of climate change<sup>18</sup>.

The first three BRICS summits defined the institutional characteristics that would shape the group. This was, therefore, the first step in the BRICS institutional trajectory. It is an arrangement with little institutionalization, without a constitutive agreement, secretariat or headquarters. In short terms, it is not an international organization. BRICS allows countries to establish comprehensive agendas, ranging from the establishment of common intergovernmental positions in multilateral fora to mechanisms for trans-governmental and transnational cooperation<sup>19</sup>. At the same time, the absence of a binding common agreement, which obliges governments to converge their actions around certain issues, allows the “BRICS agenda” to be modified according to the opportunities of governments at the particular moment in which the summit meetings take place. In this sense, points of disagreement are circumvented, inhibiting conflict between BRICS countries, and the points of agreement are highlighted (Jesus, 2013, Abdenur, 2014, Cooper & Farooq, 2015). However, this form of cooperation means that the permanence of the BRICS depends on the relevance attributed to it by the respective governments in their foreign policy agendas.

The emphasis given to the BRICS joint positions could be seen in the context of the voting of the NATO military intervention in the Syrian conflict in 2011. In the vote on Security Council Resolution 1979 UN<sup>20</sup>, which sought to support intervention based on the newly formulated principle of the responsibility to protect (R2P), the BRICS countries, with the exception of South Africa<sup>21</sup>, abstained. This common position revealed a convergence between these countries not only in economic matters, but also in international security (Stuenkel, 2015). Over time, however, the Syrian civil war lost relevance on the BRICS agenda, and Russia became, by itself, a major player in that conflict (Abdenur, 2016).

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obligations. The rules are specific prescriptions or proscriptions for action. Decision-making procedures are prevailing practices for making and executing collective decisions. (Krasner, 1983, p. 02).

18 The links between the BRICS countries, except Russia, had already taken place within the framework of the United Nations Conference on Climate Change held in Copenhagen in 2010. The coalition, called BASIC, argued that newly industrialized countries should not have binding targets for reduction of the emission of greenhouse gases, an obligation that should only cover countries of advanced industrialization - such as Russia.

19 The terms used here correspond to the international interconnection channels established by Keohane and Nye (1977) in their classic discussion of complex interdependence.

20 As a matter of fact, all BRICS countries made up the UN Security Council at that time, either as permanent members (Russia and China) or temporary (Brazil, India and South Africa).

21 South Africa voted in favor of the resolution.

Despite the limited institutionalization of BRICS in its first stage, the second stage of its trajectory is marked by the establishment of formal institutions, namely the Contingent Reserves Agreement (CRA) and the New Development Bank (NDB), which have mechanisms that generate obligations. The second stage of the BRICS institutionalization also expands the South-South cooperation agenda, which now covers various topics of interest to national bureaucracies and civil society<sup>22</sup>.

In 2012, the fourth BRICS summit took place in New Delhi, India. At this summit, the BRICS leaders stressed their concern about the slowness of the IFIs' reform process<sup>23</sup>. During the summit, the possibility of creating a BRICS bank, that could fund projects of infrastructure and sustainable development, was discussed for the first time. In the same year, on the margins of the G20 meeting, group leaders met to discuss the possibility of establishing an arrangement of currency swaps. In 2013, during the Durban summit, the NDB and the CRA were created, whose constituent documents<sup>24</sup> were signed the following year, in the Fortaleza summit. During the Durban and Fortaleza summits, BRICS leaders met with heads of state from African and South American countries, respectively<sup>25</sup>, (Damico, 2015), in order to broaden the relationship between BRICS and the Global South, particularly with regard to the diversification of commercial and investment partnerships<sup>26</sup>.

Initially, the creation of the NDB and the CRA was viewed with optimism among various political analysts. It was hoped that the new institutions would strengthen BRICS not only as leaders of developing countries but also as an alternative to IMF and the World Bank (Moreira Júnior & Figueira, 2014). In this sense, the BRICS would be deepening its revisionism about the

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22 It is beyond the scope of this article to draw up an exhaustive list of South-South cooperation agreements signed under the tutelage of the BRICS. For this reason, we only mention them at its foundational moment, when we still wanted to affirm the institutional characteristics of BRICS.

23 It is important to note that the BRICs failed to support a jointly-named name for the post of IMF Managing Director following the departure of Frenchman Dominique Strauss-Kahn, making room for the election of Frenchwoman Christine Lagarde. Although it is an event that reveals the difficulty of forming a common agenda among the BRIC countries in international regimes - and in particular the IMF.

24 An agreement and a treaty, respectively.

25 <<http://www.brics2018.org.za/en/previous-summits>>. Accessed on 12 May 2018.

26 At the 2017 summit, the concept of the BRICS Plus was defined as a substitute for the BRICS outreach established at the first summits to expand BRICS partnerships with the Global South countries and to define common positions in multilateral institutions <<http://www.brics2018.org.za/en/brics-outreach>>. Accessed on 17 May 2018.



international order<sup>27</sup>. Over time, it was perceived that this view was based on exaggerated projections. The institutional design of the RTA itself, for example, is in line with current IMF standards<sup>28</sup> (Cattaneo et al., 2015). The NDB is limited to lending to the BRICS countries themselves and therefore does not provide collective benefits to developing countries outside the bloc, as in the Bretton Woods institutions, which have historically contributed to the establishment of hegemony in the post-World War II era. In other words, by limiting the benefits of NDB to themselves, the BRICS refuse the prerogative of building hegemonic leadership at the international level.

External and internal events in the BRICS countries undermined their belief in their high and continuous economic growth, which would be the material basis for them to dispute the leading role in the international order with the developed countries. On the external front, the end of the commodity boom (between 2012 and 2014) had a negative impact on the economies of Brazil and Russia, which went into recession. Ironically, the end of the super-cycle of high commodity prices in the international market is explained in part by the decline in Chinese demand, which has adjusted to the new level of economic growth of the country, currently around 6-7% per year. Therefore, there was an expansion of the pre-existing asymmetry within the BRICS, with China and India registering strong economic growth rates, Brazil and Russia in recession and South Africa with modest GDP growth.

In domestic politics, there are also important changes which affect the definition of the BRICS foreign policy. In Brazil, the deposition of Dilma Rousseff led to the emergence of a government linked with the developed countries interests, rejecting a natural affinity with developing countries. This change became apparent when Brazil and other countries governed by the right and center-right in South America (Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, Peru, and Colombia) indefinitely suspended their participation of UNASUR, due to disagreements with the left governments, in particular from Bolivia and Venezuela. On the other hand, the Chinese government has emphasized initiatives that reveal the strength of its leadership, creating the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and launching the project to build the so-called New Silk Road. In Russia, even though security issues have never left the Putin government's concerns, they have been given a new impetus in the context of

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27 The term soft revisionism can be found in Lima (2010), Saraiva (2013), among others. It approaches, fundamentally, the discussion on soft balancing that will be discussed in the next section.

28 When borrowing from the CRA, countries must commit to providing information to the IMF and to subjecting them to the monitoring mechanisms set out in the Fund's agreement (Cattaneo et al., 2015).



the Syrian war, relegating concerns about the international financial architecture to a secondary level.

In this context, the third stage of the BRICS institutional trajectory is inaugurated, marking the present moment: the summit meetings continue to be organized annually - Goa (2016), Xiamen (2017) and Johannesburg (2018) - and their leaders continue to maintain meetings on the margins of the G20 meetings. In addition, extensive joint statements are produced at the end of the summit meetings - addressing relevant issues of global governance - new intra-BRICS cooperation agreements are signed and NDB begins to grant its first loans for renewable energy projects, basic infrastructure, and transportation. However, the initial optimism about BRICS's elevation to the forefront of international relations, with its leading role in the discussions on global problems - international financial architecture, humanitarian intervention, climate change - does not exist. According to information on the 2018 Summit website in Johannesburg, BRICS currently has a more limited approach to promoting intra-group economic development, which was only part of its objectives in its founding stage:

The BRICS approach is informed by the need to deepen, broaden and intensify relations within the group and between individual countries for a more sustainable, equitable and mutually beneficial development. This approach takes into account the growth, development and poverty goals of each member in order to ensure that relations are built on the basis of each country's economic strengths and avoid competition whenever possible. The bloc provides a unique opportunity for BRICS countries to expand and deepen their cooperation in order to significantly advance their economic development agendas as well as the agendas of other developing countries. (BRICS, 2018)<sup>29</sup>

At this point, it is important to ask: why Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa remain in the BRICS? Our hypothesis is that the BRICS provides selective benefits to its members, enabling them to promote South-South cooperation, while keeping the possibility of reactivating the advocacy coalition on global issues open. In other words, its barely institutionalized format is a facilitator of coordination and cooperation among its members, which, contrary to common sense, encourages its permanence as a minilateral arrangement.

In order to answer the question, it is necessary to understand the nature and behavior of the BRICS. In the next section, we review the literature

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29 Available at: <<http://www.brics2018.org.za/en/what-brics>>. Accessed on 19 May 2018.

on the BRICS, seeking to identify the proposals to explain the group by different authors of diverse theoretical approaches.

## Unraveling the BRICS: revisiting theoretical approaches

Since the BRIC(S) settled as an institutional arrangement, overcoming the prevailing financial perspective coined by Jim O'Neill, extensive literature was produced to understand its nature and behavior. It is not, of course, a regional trade promotion organization, moving away from the regional blocs prevailing in the international arena, such as the European Union, Mercosur and NAFTA. Nor is there any ideological convergence between the governments that make it up (Gonçalves, 2014) or a search for making the BRICS an international organization (Nogueira, 2015). BRICS therefore departs from the more traditional forms of institutionalized cooperation in international relations.

The innovation of the BRICS emergence became the subject of academic discussions in international relations. According to Fonseca Jr. (2015), the BRICS has a dimension *hacia afuera*, aimed at coordinating the positions of these countries in the international regimes and other decision-making bodies which govern the global rules, and a *hacia adentro* dimension, focused on the promotion of intra-cooperation<sup>30</sup>. There are different definitions of the BRICS - club organization model (Cooper & Farooq, 2015); coalition (Oliveira & Onuki, 2013, Abdenur, 2014); imagined community (Brütsch & Pope, 2013) - and about the group's behavior on the international stage - soft balancing (Flemes, 2010); soft bandwagoning (Spektor apud Stuenkel, 2015); subimperialism (Bond, 2016) - which take as reference different theoretical aspects of international relations (neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism and constructivism) and social sciences (Marxism).

Cooper and Farooq (2015) classify the BRICS as an informal club. Participation in the BRICS is restricted, members define themselves the annual summit agenda and the goods produced are exclusive to their members. The authors explain:

The BRICS are a club that manifests self-selective exclusivity. The exclusivity of the BRICS is based on the attribution of both internal and external status. Internally, BRICS members affirm the status of 'emerging power' and status assignment derives from peer recognition, which is positive, as

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<sup>30</sup> In this dimension, the BRICS constitutes a cooperative arrangement, "involving the exchange between the parties of material, symbolic and ideational goods" (Lima, 2010, p.164).

it reaffirms and reinforces status among members, but can also be negative, as it demonstrates competitive ambition for power (...). Externally, BRICS members design an international status outside their club, which is based on the narrative of 'South-South' solidarity and is realized through their leadership in representing the developing world. (Cooper & Farooq, 2015: 22).

Based on a functionalist reading, Stuenkel (2013, 2015) considers the BRICS as an institution - albeit an informal one - which composes the set of mechanisms aimed at global governance at the same time. With regard to the intra-BRICS dimension, in particular, the author argues that financial cooperation was the starting point for confidence building between Brazil, Russia, India, China (and later South Africa) , expanding it to several other areas. These include the construction of formal institutions - the CRA and the NDB -, leading Stuenkel to affirm that there is a tendency for the institutionalized intra-BRICS cooperation to remain in the future.

Oliveira and Onuki (2013) emphasize the *hacia afuera* dimension of the BRICS, classifying it as a coalition that seeks to "counterbalance the hegemonic weight of the United States in the international order"<sup>31</sup> (Oliveira & Onuki, 2013: 89). Abdenur (2014), in turn, classifies the BRICS as a loose coalition, which is embedded in international arrangements of variable geometry and different levels of institutionalization, being present in formal organizations (UN and Bretton Woods institutions) and informal (G20 and IBSA Forum, in addition to the BRICS itself). Although Abdenur (2014) rejects the idea that the BRICS countries intend to overturn the current international order, it asserts that the grouping assists China in its counter-hegemonic position vis-à-vis the United States, but there is no direct confrontation. The author, therefore, differs from Oliveira and Onuki (2013), who consider the BRICS together as a counter-hegemonic grouping. Abdenur (2014) also highlights the dynamism of the BRICS, which was able to modify its composition (with the entry of South Africa) and agenda along its short trajectory:

"This dynamism contrasts with the inflexibility of established organizations

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31 Hamilton and Whalley define coalition as "any group of decision makers who participate in a negotiation and who make an agreement to act in concert in order to reach a common goal" (Hamilton & Whalley 1989: 547). Narlikar (2012) emphasizes that the "collective defense of a common position by a coalition is the product of conscious co-ordination, rather than a coincidental alignment of interests" (Narlikar, 2012, p.195). Along the same lines, Oliveira and Onuki, countries form coalitions in the "attempt to forge coordination of positions in international institutions as a way of leveraging the bargaining powers of the member countries of these coalitions" (Oliveira & Onuki, 2013, p.89).

and confers certain advantages on its members by allowing them to engage in specific dialogues on topics and to cement ties informally - even by rallying large international events - without committing themselves to a rigid alliance. Although the BRICS are a loose coalition, they are not improvised, addressing areas as diverse as collective security, financial governance, and climate change as windows of opportunity emerge. (Abdenur, 2014: 87).

From a constructivist perspective on the BRICS, Mielniczuk (2013), while recognizing that the group brings together diverse countries, highlights the existence of a shared worldview among these countries, namely the existence of an unfair global order. This common understanding allowed the BRICS countries to establish their own identity, allowing the formation and consolidation of the group, which aims to promote substantive changes in international relations.

In a skeptical perspective on the BRICS, Brüttsch & Papa (2013) evaluate the cohesion of the group against two types of ideas: (1) utilizing a rationalist perspective, they seek to analyze the behavior of the BRICS as a coalition which aims the emergence among countries in the international arena; (2) following a constructivist approach, the authors discuss the possibility of understand the BRICS as an imagined community, seeking a joint emergency in international relations while sharing understandings, ideas, and world views. For Brüttsch and Papa, the convergence of the BRICS countries, whether around a coalition or an imagined community, is precarious, which puts their survival at risk. In summary, the authors believe that the BRICS may be no more than a “geopolitical fashion style”.

Regarding the BRICS purposes or its behavior at the global level, Flandes (2010) considers that these countries seek soft balancing against the hegemonic power, the United States. According to the author:

Soft balancing does not directly challenge the military preponderance of the United States, but rather uses non-military instruments to retard, frustrate, and undermine the superpower's unilateral policies. Soft balancing involves institutional strategies such as the formation of limited coalitions or diplomatic entente such as BRIC, IBAS, G3 and G21 to restrict the power of the established great powers. (...). It also involves strengthening economic ties between emerging powers through collaboration in different sectors. That could change the balance of economic power in the medium term. (Flandes, 2010: 145).

BRICS would seek to reform the international order seeking their own economic objectives. Hard balancing - as discussed in the Neorealist literature

- is not an option for the BRICS, not only because of its (still) limited material capabilities, but also because they would not be benefited after a collapse of the international order (Flemes, 2010).

Stuenkel (2015), using the term coined by Matias Spektor, considers that the BRICS does not present a behavior oriented by soft balancing, but by the soft bandwagoning, since they do not pretend to delegitimize the current order or to defy US hegemony: the BRICS intends to broaden the decision-making processes of the IFIs created at Bretton Woods<sup>32</sup>.

From an institutionalist language, Cooper (2014) and Cooper & Farooq (2015) discard that BRICS seeks to compete with the G20, arguing that it behaves like a lobby group that seeks to promote its interests within the scope of this arrangement. According to the authors, the BRICS is not yet constituted as a forum capable of articulating, autonomously, its agency power in international relations.

Stephen (2014), following a materialistic historical reading, suggests that the BRICS does not reject the international order, but only its emphasis on liberalism, given that these are countries with a greater predominance of state interventionism and, therefore, less sympathy looking for liberal measures. For the author, the emergence of new powers in recent years has led to the deepening of transnational ties, including among the countries of the Global South, but at the same time, it has opened the way for the questioning of the principles that guide and organize the international order.

Also from a Marxist perspective, Bond (2016) considers that the BRICS, and in particular the CRA and the NDB, are an expression of sub-imperial finance. The author resorts to Harvey's discussion of sub-imperialism in the current stage of financial capitalism. He points out that the new developing centers for capital accumulation have sought to shed their surplus capital into new spheres of influence. In this sense, the NDB and the CRA only conform to the existing IFIs, while the BRICS, as a bloc, only reproduces a sub-imperialist behavior (Bond, 2016).

In the table, we seek to summarize the main interpretations present in the literature regarding the nature and behavior of the BRICS:

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32 The same evidence - the BRICS participation in the G20 and the demand for reform of the Bretton Woods institutions rather than their abandonment - is taken by Flemes (2010) and Stuenkel (2015) to agree with the mutually exclusive hypotheses of soft balancing and soft bandwagoning, respectively.

Table 1: Interpretations on the BRICS nature and behavior in literature

Theoretical approach	Author	Nature	Behaviour
Rationalism (Realism)	Flemes (2010)	Coalition / flexible alliance	<i>Soft balancing</i>
Rationalism	Oliveira & Onuki (2013)	Coalizão	Counter-hegemony
Rationalism	Abdenur (2014)	Weak coalition	Reformism; support for Chinese counter-hegemony
Rationalism (Institutionalism)	Cooper (2014); Cooper & Farooq (2015)	Club	<i>Lobby</i>
Rationalism (Functionalism)	Stuenkel (2013; 2015)	Institution	Cooperation and <i>soft bandwagoning</i>
Rationalism / Constructivism	Brütsch & Papa (2013)	Weak coalition; precarious imaginary community	Inconsistent
Constructivism	Mielniczuk (2013)	Political group with common identity	Reformism
Marxism	Stephen (2014)	Emerging powers	Answering the liberal characteristics of the global order
Marxism	Bond (2014)	Bloc	Subimperialism

In the next section, we bring our contribution to the debate on the nature and behavior of the BRICS, classifying the grouping as a transregional advocacy coalition.

## BRICS as a transregional advocacy coalition

Searching to further conceptualize the BRICS, we understand that the studies of international regionalism allow us to look differently at this group of countries, which is based, in synthesis, on a high degree of informality, which remained in this first decade of existence. Without exaggeration, apart from the NDB and the CRA, the only articulation element of the BRICS countries is the commitment of their annual summit meetings

(Soderbaum, 2016).

Based on different authors, Soderbaum (2016) advocates denaturalizing the neorealist, liberal or constructivist understanding of regional organizations, which seems to us to be highly valuable in understanding an informal and at the same time relatively structured entity like the BRICS.

Hettne supports the first aspect of Soderbaum's argument when he summarizes the importance of the denaturalization of the creation and trajectory of international organizations, noting that "regionalism is more complex and often more damaging than simply an instrument to strengthen an ambiguous 'national interest' (realism) or the 'public good' through trade, development, security and so on (liberalism)" (Soderbaum, 2016: 53).

This perspective is articulated with poststructuralist and post-modern proposals in IR, in which the very notion of space is made by Nieimann (apud Soderbaum, 2016), who attributes to the less interest in regional studies exactly the absence of a discussion about space in IR, traditionally based on two levels, namely, the state level and the global level.

According to Soderbaum (2016), this leads us to what Neumann calls the Regional Building Approach, which comes to understand regions through 'policies of definition and redefinition' of this intermediate unit between the state and the international order, a new perspective which can better conceptualize the BRICS.

The trajectory of this unique international entity, which is the BRICS countries, should benefit from the recent contributions of the regional studies above, moving away to a lesser or greater extent from the perceptions already discussed.

Without any kind of foundational organizational document, the declarations of the summit meetings can be taken as a striking indicator of the specific characteristic of the BRICS group: all are initiated with paragraphs that reaffirm the link of the member countries with what can be understood as a group project which is the defense of a reordering of the Bretton Woods economic-financial architecture in the direction of a formal and substantive democratization of it, including so-called emerging countries.

Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa maintained the founding propositions in the ten meetings, as well as adding new ones, all within an underlying principle of consensual action, visible even in moments



of in the extra-BRICS foreign policy of the group countries.

BRICS, so defined less by formal, statutory objectives than by a permanent self-definition struggle as an advocacy group of emerging countries, and may perhaps be understood so far as a transregional advocacy coalition in transition, corresponding to the policy of definition and redefinition of the grouping.

## Final remarks

In this article, we sought to conceptualize the BRICS as a transregional advocacy coalition. In order to do this, we reconstructed the narrative of the institutional trajectory of the BRICS construction and consolidation, as well as to the literature review that seeks to classify the grouping regarding its nature and behavior.

In this discussion, we intended to bring our contribution to the role of the BRICS in international relations. With no ambition to end the subject, we argued that the BRICS must be interpreted in the light of the ideas that articulate these countries around a common cause. In this sense, we approached an interpretive key of the constructivist approach to international relations, understanding that the sharing of beliefs, ideas and worldviews is an open process. From our perspective, the analyzes which consider the BRICS as a coalition by rationalistic lenses (realist or institutionalist) can not explain the reason why such diverse countries have met and still persist despite economic<sup>33</sup> and political<sup>34</sup> crises experienced by its members. To understand the nature and behavior of the BRICS, it becomes necessary to understand how its facet as a cooperative arrangement articulates with its definition as a coalition (or lobby group). For us, the advocacy coalition model brings important contributions to understanding this articulation.

All this characterization of a “transregional advocacy coalition” gives meaning to the own characteristics of the BRICS formation and action. On one hand, it is marked by an affirmation of a founding principle, to which are associated other unfoldings related to that founding idea in response to the external scenario (of the group) in transformation during its first decade of existence, without losing its identity. On the other hand, this performance is based on an intense and diversified bilateral and multilateral cooperation between member countries - typical of South-South relations, moving away

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<sup>33</sup> Brazil and Russia.

<sup>34</sup> Brazil and South Africa.

from any hierarchy between donor and recipient, strengthening bilateral and multilateral relations which are established within the BRICS.

In this way, the BRICS affirms itself as a new form of concerted international action by a group - more than a group - of countries with an important impact on the concert of nations, regardless of whether it constitutes a “consolidated” international organization or not (Soderbaum, 2016).

Last but not least, it should be added that an empirical challenge for the BRICS, and for Brazil in particular, was the deposition of Dilma Rousseff and the rise of the Michel Temer government, which has implemented a neoliberal economic agenda and established as a priority of Brazilian foreign policy the North / South relations. Although Brazil remains in the BRICS, its leadership in articulating the demands and ideas common to the Global South has collapsed. In this context, Brazil’s participation in the BRICS has a low profile, and contacts are maintained at the bureaucratic and civil society levels, but with a shy support of the government regarding its goals to reform global governance institutions.

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, we aim to: (i) review the concepts adopted in the literature to explain the nature and behavior of the BRICS in international relations and (ii) present a new BRICS conceptualization proposal. From the first to the last Summit Conference, the BRICS explicitly advocates a multilateral world order through the inclusion of emerging countries in the base institutions of the Western order. For the elaboration of the article, we review the literature on BRICS, as well as the approach on regionalism proposed by Soderbaum to elaborate our conceptualization of the BRICS as an advocacy coalition.

## KEYWORDS

BRICS; institution; advocacy coalition

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